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SUBJECT: NDP PLANS TO RUN "LARGEST CAMPAIGN" EVER

11. (SBU) Summary: New Democratic Party (NDP) leader Jack Layton has announced that the NDP "will run the largest campaign that our party has ever run in its history" in the next federal elections, which many observers believe will take place in 2008. Although it holds the fewest seats of the four major parties in the House of Commons, the NDP significantly increased its representation in the last federal elections, and hopes to build on momentum from a 2007 by-election victory in Quebec. With strong ties to organized labor and a platform focused on social justice, the NDP has built its reputation on supporting Canada's working families. The NDP continues to call for the immediate withdrawal of Canadian troops from Afghanistan, but is not an influential voice in foreign affairs. End summary.

MORE PREPARED THAN EVER...

12. (U) In a year-end interview, NDP leader Jack Layton said that the NDP is already gearing up for "what appears to be an increasingly likely election" in 2008. He admitted, however, that the timing of a federal election will depend largely on when the Liberal Party decides finally to oppose the government on a confidence measure, rather than maintain its policy of "whipped abstentions." Layton claimed that "we're more prepared than we've ever been. We'll run the largest campaign that our party has ever run in its history." Layton added that he had been especially encouraged by the NDP's victory in a September by-election in Outremont, Quebec. Layton commented that the Quebec victory would help cast the NDP as a national party, since "you can't really offer yourself as a governing team if you're not able to bring forward voices from Quebec. That's always been an obstacle to our growth." Layton voiced optimism about the NDP's national prospects, claiming that "what I'm seeing is that more people have their door open to a conversation with New Democrats." The NDP will begin its election preparations in mid-January with an Ottawa meeting of NDP federal and provincial leaders from across the country.

...BUT IS THE PUBLIC?

13. (SBU) In any future elections, the NDP likely plans prominently to contrast the articulate Layton -- a former Toronto Councilor who became NDP leader in 2003 -- with Liberal leader Stephane Dion, whom opponents have labeled as a mild-mannered academic with weak leadership skills and a shaky grasp of English. According to a November 2007 SES poll, 17 percent of Canadians rated Layton as the best choice for Prime Minister, compared with only 13 percent who chose Dion, while 37 percent supported Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper. A November 2007 online Angus-Reid poll had even more striking results, with 34 pct saying that Layton would make a good Prime Minister, and only 23 supporting Dion. The Liberals will likely counter-claim that support

for the NDP in the 2006 elections effectively resulted in the Conservatives' victory, and will stress that a vote for the NDP is really a vote for the Conservatives next time around as well.

¶4. (U) While holding only 30 seats in the Commons (the fewest of the four major parties), the NDP's representation is up significantly from the 19 seats it had won in 2004. However, according to a December Canadian Press Harris-Decima survey, NDP support nationwide was only 15 percent, compared with 32 percent for the Liberals and 30 percent for the Conservatives. Even this level is a drop from the 17 percent support the NDP received in the 2006 elections.
Qsupport the NDP received in the 2006 elections.

NDP ESPOUSES SOCIAL ASSISTANCE, AFGHANISTAN WITHDRAWAL

¶5. (U) The NDP has always billed itself as the defender of working families. It supports increasing access to affordable housing, securing public health care, protecting collective bargaining rights, establishing universal access to child care, and generally expanding social assistance programs. On foreign policy, the NDP supports greater assistance for Africa and other poverty-stricken areas. The party is critical of free trade, calling for the dismantling of NAFTA and blaming free trade policies for the loss of Canadian manufacturing jobs. The environment is also one of the NDP's major issues, with the party attacking the Conservatives for joining the United States and Japan in insisting that a climate change agreement include all major emitters, including China and India. The NDP has also called the Liberals weak on climate change, criticizing their decision not to vote against the Conservatives' October 2007

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"Speech from the Throne" in which the government announced Canada would abandon its commitments under the Kyoto Protocol.

¶6. (SBU) The NDP remains the only political party calling for the immediate withdrawal of Canadian troops from Afghanistan. Layton has charged that the recent turmoil in Pakistan further demonstrates that Canada is on the wrong track in Afghanistan, saying that the country should focus on aid and reconstruction efforts rather than military operations. In a December meeting with PolMinCouns and poloff, NDP foreign affairs critic Paul Dewar insisted that the NDP would remain adamant against the continuation of the Canadian Forces' mission in Afghanistan -- not just in Kandahar -- whatever the Manley Panel might recommend, and he predicted that Afghanistan would be a major issue in the next elections.

COMMENT

¶7. (U) The NDP has no hope in the foreseeable future of winning enough seats to form a government, but may be able to hold on to its current level of support and even do better, given the persistently weak popularity of both Conservative leader Stephen Harper and Dion. The NDP has carved out a niche among traditional leftist and working class Canadian voters, and will remain a minor force in the next election, although it needs to be watchful of the even smaller Green Party, which is attempting to garner support from the same pool of environmentally-minded liberal voters. The NDP's primary focus will remain on domestic policy, and, with its rigid stance on the Afghanistan issue, the NDP has essentially taken itself out of a responsible debate on the future of this mission, as well as other foreign policies of even less concern to its core constituencies.

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